



## SLAVERY AND FOOD SECURITY: THE FISHING FLEET

*Recruited for work on a long-haul fishing boat taking on crew in Singapore, Ronald – a 32 year-old Filipino – was made to sign a new contract upon arrival in the office of a Singapore labor recruiter. The contract stipulated that he would forfeit four months' salary as labor recruiting fees and face a \$2,000 penalty if he tried to break the three year contract – conditions not divulged during his recruitment in the Philippines. Ronald then had his passport taken away and for the next nine months hauled heavy fishing gear for 18 hours a day. He and two other Filipinos were able to escape when the boat docked in another city.*

About 3,000 miles east of Jakarta, the remote island of Tual has become a depository for hundreds of exploited Burmese fishermen who are no longer deemed useful or who have escaped the boats on which they were held in servitude. This is just the most dramatic manifestation of a subset of modern slavery that continues to plague the high seas – the men of the Pacific and Indian Ocean fisheries.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicates most crew members on Thai-owned long-haul fishing vessels are undocumented Burmese and Cambodians, many of whom are forced or deceived into working grueling hours for many months, even years, before being allowed off the boats. Filipino seafarers fall into debt bondage and confinement after Singaporean companies recruit them for work aboard long-haul fishing boats that leave from Singapore's ports and fly Taiwan's flag.

Slavery at sea, first highlighted in this report in 2007, remains prevalent and may have increased. Capitalizing on unclear jurisdictions and the difficulty of inspecting boats in deep water, some owners of Asian fishing fleets and seafood companies that depend on their catches are relying on forced labor to harvest ever-diminishing fish stocks. As Thai boats have overfished their country's own territorial waters and Thai seafarers have largely abandoned the Thai fishing industry in favor of better jobs on land, the Thai fishing fleets use undocumented foreign migrants and have headed out to Burmese, Indonesian, and Malaysian waters. In March 2011, an expose in New Zealand's press revealed the widespread and known use of forced labor aboard foreign boats – flying

under the flags of Korea, Taiwan, and China, among others – that hold licenses to fish in New Zealand's waters.

The UN Environmental Program warns that continued fishing at current levels, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and even in West Africa, is not sustainable and will threaten global food security. Furthermore, an IOM report released in early 2011 and research done by the United Nations' Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) indicate that much of this unsustainable fishing is even more tainted – by modern slavery. UNIAP surveyed Burmese workers exploited on such boats and found that 59 percent have witnessed their Thai boat captains murdering one of their colleagues. IOM reports that most of the more than 700 Thai boats fishing in Indonesian waters are not registered with the Indonesian government and do not abide by a 2006 agreement between the Indonesian and Thai governments requiring that a percentage of fish caught in Indonesian waters be offloaded and processed in Indonesian ports. They also violate Indonesian law requiring that all fishing boat crew members carry adequate documentation.

Seeking to avoid catch restrictions, taxes on fish catches, and the possible escape or rescue of enslaved crew, the Thai fishing boats have taken to off-loading catches and on-loading fuel and supplies off the Indonesian coast without docking on dry land, allowing the boats to remain at sea for extended periods and eliminating the one chance the men might have to escape. Without a coordinated effort by governments in the region, the enslavement of foreign migrants in the East Asian waters will continue to contribute to an impending food security crisis.